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ABSTRACT

Research on belief perseverance has demonstrated that a belief persists to the extent that there are more explanations available to the believer to support the original belief than to support alternative beliefs. This study extends earlier work (Slusher, 1988) that demonstrated the role of explanation availability in mediating belief change. Introductory psychology students read causal or noncausal information indicating Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) cannot be spread by casual contact. Explanation availability and beliefs were assessed 3 weeks later, and subjects were given the opportunity to assist an AIDS charity to explore whether behaviors, in addition to beliefs, might be differentially affected by these distinct types of information. Results indicated causal information affected beliefs and behavioral intentions. Explanation availability mediated information's effect on beliefs. This study has clear implications for those attempting to change beliefs, including those responsible for AIDS education: causal information is more effective than noncausal information in affecting both long-term beliefs and behavioral intentions. Specifically, this study suggests that causal information plays a significant role in altering explanation availability; altering beliefs that rest upon the support of those explanations; and affecting behavioral tendencies based upon those beliefs. (ABL)

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Causal Information about AIDS: Effects on Long-term Beliefs and Behavioral Intentions

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Abstract

Subjects read causal or noncausal information indicating AIDS cannot be spread by casual contact. Explanation availability and beliefs were assessed 3 weeks later, and subjects were given the opportunity to assist an AIDS charity. Results: Causal information affected beliefs and behavioral intentions. Explanation availability mediated information's effect on beliefs.

Introduction. Research on belief perseverance has demonstrated that a belief persists to the extent that there are more explanations available to the believer to support the original belief than to support alternative beliefs (Anderson, New, & Speer, 1985). The current study extends earlier work (Slusher, 1988) that demonstrated the role of explanation availability in mediating belief change. The purpose of the current study is to examine effects of causal and noncausal information on explanation availability and beliefs in a relatively long time frame, and explore whether behaviors, in addition to beliefs, might be differentially affected by these distinct types of information. Causal information should be more effective than noncausal information in affecting explanation availability, and thus have long-term effects on beliefs and possibly behaviors.

Procedure. Introductory psychology students participated in the two sessions of this experiment. In session 1, subjects were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 X 2 factorial design. In each condition, subjects read information supporting the belief that Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) cannot be spread by casual contact. One factor of the design varied whether or not causal evidence (processes of viral transmission) was included in the communication. The second factor varied the inclusion of noncausal evidence (outlining patterns of infection). Thus subjects read causal and/or noncausal information (or in one condition, read conclusions without either causal or noncausal supporting evidence). In session 2, held 3 weeks later in the context of an unrelated study, subjects' beliefs about AIDS transmission were assessed. In addition, availability of explanations supporting the target belief was assessed by an ease of imagination measure, and a behavioroid measure assessed subjects' willingness to act favorably toward people with AIDS by assisting a local AIDS charity.

Results. As expected, results yielded a significant effect on beliefs for the causal information factor, and no other main or interaction effects (see Fig. 1). Means indicated that beliefs were more congruent with the communication in the presence of causal information, even after the 3-week delay. Explanation availability showed the same pattern of results, and accounted for unique variance in beliefs. The information manipulation no longer accounted for unique variance in beliefs when explanation availability was included in the model, consistent with the expectation that explanation availability would act as a mediating variable (see Fig. 2). In addition, the behavioroid measure yielded a significant effect of causal

information and no other effects (see Fig. 3).

Conclusions and implications. This study has clear implications for those attempting to change beliefs, including those responsible for AIDS education: causal information is more effective than noncausal information in affecting both long-term beliefs and behavioral intentions. Specifically, this study suggests that causal information plays a significant role in 1) altering explanation availability, 2) altering beliefs that rest upon the support of those explanations, and 3) affecting behavioral tendencies based upon those beliefs.

References

Anderson, C.A., New, B.L., & Speer, J.R. (1985). Argument availability as a mediator of social theory perseverance. Social Cognition, 3, 235-249.

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Belief Scores

Significant effect of causal information: $F(1,258) = 4.73, p<.04$

No effect of noncausal information: $p>.75$

No interaction: $p>.45$

	Means
Causal information present	6.60
Causal information absent	6.13
Noncausal information present	6.35
Noncausal information absent	6.29

Figure 1. Effects of causal and noncausal information on belief scores.

Explanation Availability

Significant effect of causal information: $F(1,263) = 9.97, p<.002$

Nonsignificant effect of noncausal information: $p=.15$

No interaction: $p>.80$

Accounting for unique variance in Belief scores

Causal information nonsignificant, $p>.80$

Explanation availability, $F(1,255)=227.61, p<.001$

Figure 2. Effects of causal and noncausal information on explanation availability.

Behavioroid Scores

Significant effect of causal information:

$F(1,251) = 4.37, p<.04$

No other effects: $ps>.25$

Causal information present	.68
Causal information absent	.46

Figure 3. Effects of causal and noncausal information on behavioroid measure.